

The American Dream

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Roth's expertise is in American studies and Holocaust studies, as well as in philosophy and religion, has been advanced by postdoctoral appointments as a Graves Fellow in the Humanities University of Innsbruck, Austria (1973-74), and a fellow of the National Humanities Institute, Yale University (1976-77). He used a 1979-79 Demonstration Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop two model interdisciplinary courses: "Perspectives on the American Dream" and "Perspectives on the 20th Century: The Holocaust."

During his 1981-82 sabbatical, Roth was a visiting Professor of Philosophy at Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan, and then spent a semester in Israel as visiting Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Haifa. From 1981 to 1983, along with Professor Kenji Yoshida of Doshisha University, Roth received the first Faculty Pairing Grant awarded by the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission.

In addition to lecturing widely throughout the United States and around the world, Roth has published 150 articles and reviews and fifteen books. His most recent books are Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy (1987; with Richard L. Rubenstein), The Questions of Philosophy (1988; with Frederick Sontag), and American Ground: Vistas, Visions and Revisions (1988: edited with Robert H. Fossum).

Roth is a member of the editorial board of the American Journal of Theology and Philosophy. He also serves as the book review editor for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and recently was appointed by Paragon House Publishers as a general editor for The Paragon Issues on Philosophy Series.

Lecture One: The American Dream: From Its Past to Its Future

- I. The "American Dream" is an ambiguous term as seen in popular culture.
 - A. This pattern is reflected in music, television, film, and literature.
 - B. The press keeps the term in print, and advertising capitalizes on the concept.
- II. People have many perceptions of what the "American Dream" is.
 - A. For some, the dream is part of an ideology that snares and deludes.
 - B. The dream is often portrayed as jingoistic.
 - C. Self-determination, success, wealth, and acquisition are words often used to describe the "American Dream."
 - D. For some, the dream denotes a set of social and moral ideals.
- III. Persons, places, and dreams conceive each other.
 - A. A nation consists of its territory, people, and laws.
 - B. A nation's longevity cannot necessarily be taken for granted.
(Conflict is often caused by a nation's own particularity.)
 - C. National identities and characteristics are facts of life.
- IV. The land is a chief ingredient that makes the dream a complex one.
 - A. How people think about and use the land puts them at odds.
 - B. Land means possibility, but immigrants found that it also meant slavery, oppression, and destruction.
- V. The founding fathers and other intellectuals have stated many of the basic assumptions of the "American Dream."
 - A. All men are created equal with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
 - B. In America, a man can abandon his ancient prejudices, act upon new principles, and be rewarded by ample subsistence.

- VI. The "American Dream" is comprised of many dreams.
- A. A persistent strand of the dream is a belief in new beginnings.
(The past isn't binding and progress is always possible.)
 - B. The dream has been lifted up as a set of ideals and has also been a target for criticism. (Americans cherish dreams, but are often skeptical about realizing them.)

Lecture Two: A New Commonwealth

- I. A figurative America existed even before European explorers mapped the coast and probed the interior of the country.
 - A. Columbus epitomized many explorers who looked to America as a place to find paradise and the fountain of youth.
 - B. Hopes were dashed when tribal and colonial interests collided and when personal gain conflicted with communal association.
- II. English speaking Protestants had decisive influence on America.
 - A. The new world was seen as a place for the human race to start fresh and to advance the Christian faith.
 - B. Puritans said they served God by being an example to the world.
- III. The Puritan's dream of new beginnings was replaced by secular hopes of social, political, economic, psychological, and even sexual rebirth.
 - A. Benjamin Franklin said virtue is the means and fortune the end.
 - B. Thomas Paine suggests that people have the power to begin again.
 - C. Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests that people and places have a past whose identity is embedded in history.
 - D. Thomas Jefferson suggests that political bonds are a serious matter.
- IV. The concept that "all men are created equal" is a troublesome one.
 - A. The women's role in the American Dream wasn't very large; neither The Declaration of Independence or Constitution elevated women to the status of political beings.
 - B. Jefferson's statements on equality are open to question since he had black slaves while he advocated emancipation.
 - C. Jefferson acknowledged a basic equality of opportunity, but the constitution and achievability of this equality is uncertain.
- V. Happiness is usually found during a struggle over ideals.

- A. "Out of many, one" is the motto of America.
 - B. Distribution of power and rights has been a contentious issue.
 - 1. Madison said that specifying rights would cause problems.
 - 2. Jefferson argued that people are entitled to such rights and shouldn't have to rely on inference.
- VI. Alexis de Tocqueville made many relevant observations about America.
- A. An American principle is figuring things out on your own.
 - B. "Public opinion" is what Americans turn to, producing conformity which is dangerous to liberty and freedom.

Lecture Three: Frontier Dreams

- I. Frederick Jackson Turner shaped the interpretation of American dreams.
 - A. Turner argued that the conditions of frontier life were the most significant facts of the nation's history to that point.
 - 1. Settlers were afforded contact with untouched nature and opportunity, an escape from the bondage of the past.
 - 2. The frontier existence fostered individualism, self-reliance, self-determination, democracy, faith, and adaptability.
 - B. Turner has been criticized, but his ideas have lasted.
 - 1. He's accused of confusing actual frontier existence with the romantic myths that have grown up around it.
 - 2. However, the West is now seen as an idealized past fused with an idealized future where anything seems possible.
 - C. The myth of the West led Americans to believe that the future is unaffected by the past, that physical movement will enhance quality of life, and that space and resources are unlimited.
- II. Ambivalence is part of the American experience.
 - A. American life often produces the mutually conflicting thoughts and feelings of which ambivalence is composed.
 - B. Early American authors praised untouched nature, yet identified America's destiny with the passing of the frontier
- III. Another feature of frontier life was the "ethnocide" of Native Americans.
 - A. Indian resistance to the "march of civilization" ended December 29, 1890 in the Battle of Wounded Knee Creek.
 - B. "The Indian Question" was answered by settlers who offered them the choice of civilization or extermination.
- IV. There was a philosophical frontier known as transcendentalism.

- A. Transcendentalists encouraged people to consider what it means to be alive. Some of their views were that:
 - 1. Intuition can lead one beyond the appearances of experience into the discovery of the fundamentals of life which consist of unity, beauty, and goodness.
 - 2. Awareness of one's relations with others should be coupled with a self-reliance rooted in the development of one's own personal, moral, and spiritual qualities.
- B. Thoreau was an outspoken, radical non-conformist and a transcendentalist. He lived in close contact with the land and was concerned with nature as a symbol of higher laws.

Lecture Four: Inalienable Rights and Rugged Individualism

- I. The American Dream depends on the gospel of self-help.
 - A. Ben Franklin promoted this vision in Poor Richard's Almanac focusing on industry, business, frugality, and temperance, while Ralph Waldo Emerson found Americans distracted by materialism.
 - B. Franklin and Emerson criticized Americans for failing to energize their potential.
 - C. Emerson recommended self-reliance to avoid "foolish consistency".
 - D. Self-reliance is a key statement of America's faith in individualism.
 - E. A danger is that self-help favors self-fulfillment over civic virtue.
- II. What does individualism at its best mean?
 - A. Tocqueville said the choice of the land itself was a lucky circumstance favoring the establishment of a democratic republic.
 - B. However, Tocqueville questioned the virtue of individualism.
 1. Citizens withdraw into a circle of family and friends.
 2. They leave society to care for itself, resulting in egoism.
 - C. Tocqueville observed that Americans hate to accept anyone's word as proof for anything.
 1. Americans rely instead on individual effort and judgment.
 2. This produces innovation, but authority and tradition are undermined, resulting in conformity.
- III. American philosophy has addressed issues of individualism.
 - A. Walt Whitman's Democratic Vistas labeled individualism as personalism.
 - B. Josiah Royce understood people to be relational. He said a community exists when people share hopes and memories.
 - C. George Santayana's Character and Opinion in the U.S. found that

every American is in exile, producing moral emptiness and an expectation to stand on your own two feet.

- D. John Dewey's Individualism Old and New advocated a "new" individualism that emphasized using human intelligence for human benefits.
- E. Robert Bellah's Habits of the Heart study observed that Americans don't practice the radical individualism they preach.
 - 1. Functionally, their lives are given meaning by familial, communal, and public ties that transcend self-fulfillment.
 - 2. Americans sense that those relationships of memory and hope are the substance of essential life.

Lecture Five: Disenchantment and Depression

- I. Dreams of success have been the most enduring for the American Dream, and in America, success is defined by material prosperity.
 - A. The Puritans saw success as a sign that God approved of them.
 - B. Jefferson said success meant forming a union complete with unalienable rights and the pursuit of goods and property.
- II. Industrial developments led to the formation of a new class of American wealth and measure of success.
 - A. Americans accepted a monetary definition of success.
 - B. This was criticized by the economist Thorstein Veblen who saw the leisure class as being guilty of conspicuous consumption and of opposing changes that might undermine their power.
- III. The policy of laissez faire has been advocated because government control is viewed suspiciously.
 - A. William Graham Sumner advocated laissez faire policy in What Social Classes Owe to Each Other.
 - 1. Sumner said social classes owed each other nothing.
 - 2. Unjust inequalities will be remedied by natural adjustments.
 - 3. Direct governmental intervention is too costly.
 - 4. In a state based on contract, sentiment is inappropriate.
 - B. Andrew Carnegie embodied Social Darwinism.
 - 1. Competition ensures "survival of the fittest".
 - 2. Progress depends on improved material conditions.
- IV. By the turn of the Century it was apparent that the gap between rich and poor was not going to be bridged by philanthropy.
 - A. The aftermath of WWI shook American idealism and people began to question scientific progress.

- B. The 20's was a conservative and confident era.
- C. The stock market crash left Americans searching for their dream.
- V. The Reagan era as described by Kevin Phillips in Politics of Rich and Poor was also a time when the dream evaded the American people.
 - A. The Reagan era produced a redistribution of wealth.
 - 1. The poor lost ground while the rich gained.
 - 2. Americans resent wealth when it's the result of favoritism.
 - B. Phillips's book has important historical dimensions.
 - 1. Distribution of wealth is at the heart of our political process.
 - 2. American politics consists of cyclical power conflicts.

Lecture Six: Dreams Deferred: Race and Gender

- I. The American Dream may have promised more than it can deliver.
 - A. Today, open space is limited and opportunity is not exceptional.
 - B. Foreign and domestic entanglements are plentiful.
- II. "All Men Are Created Equal" is greatly affected by the "color line".
 - A. W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk utilizes an image of a veil to designate the barrier dividing Blacks and Whites.
 - B. Du Bois was at odds with Booker T. Washington who saw a compromise between Blacks and Whites.
 - C. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that the constitution is color-blind, striking a blow to the color line.
 - D. Du Bois advocated an advanced education for black Americans arguing that role models (the talented tenth) were needed to guide those below them.
 - E. Du Bois said that Negro blood had a message for the world.
 - 1. The result was a sociology that combined statistics, emotions of songs, sweat, and struggle.
 - 2. Black spirituals (sorrow songs) continue to influence American music, religion, and politics.
 - F. In The Content of Our Character, Shelby Steele criticizes affirmative action saying judgements should be based on content, not race.
- III. What happens to "the dream deferred"?
 - A. The answer is that it may explode as it did during the 1960's.
 - B. A dream deferred means that the have-nots remain tantalized with hope and self-determination becomes impotent because color is more important than skill.

- C. Martin Luther King Jr. was not opposed to an explosion.
 - 1. He advocated one that would clear a path of resistance that would heal and not deepen the wounds of inequality.
 - 2. King rejected the idea that he was moving too fast.

IV. The veil of race is complex in terms of color, background, ethnicity, heritage, and lifestyle.

- A. Diversity makes living more difficult for Americans.
- B. American history is dominated by white males and rarely recognizes diversity.
- C. Domestic separation of powers has caused women to suffer.

Lecture Seven: The American Dream and Holocaust Questions

- I. The Holocaust demands interrogation and revision of ideas, values, philosophical systems, and social theory.
 - A. Japanese internment during WWII resembles the Holocaust and the injustice was a constitutional travesty.
 - B. The American abandonment of the Jews during the Hitler era is chronicled by David Wyman.
 1. Restrictive immigration policy in the 30's meant the American Dream was deferred for many hopeful immigrants.
 2. The U. S. government didn't take enough direct action to alleviate the Jewish plight.
 3. Antisemitism was high and Jews were viewed as a "menace to America".
 - C. The U.S. government has been accused of not doing a good job of screening out Nazi war criminals.
 - D. Ralph Ellison, author of the classic American novel Invisible Man would have been dismayed but not surprised by that accusation.
 1. Reflection on this problem lead him to explore American ideals and their relationship to issues of race in the U.S.
 2. The epilogue emphasized the importance of diversity, reaffirms the principle of equality, and urges a moral critique based on a division in which protest against injustice and love of the best that America offers work together.
- II. The shadow of the Holocaust questions the American Dream.
 - A. Richard Rubenstein's The Cunning of History wonders about Jefferson's self-evident truths and unalienable rights.
 1. Our most basic rights are qualitative.

2. There are no limits to assaults if people lack the power of effective resistance.
- B. If rights can be violated, how can they be called natural?
1. Rubenstein argues that rights have more credibility if it's admitted that they do not belong to men by nature.
 2. Men only have rights within the political community.
- C. Hans Maier (Jean Amery) said that the expectation of help is a fundamental experience for human beings. Therefore, the greatest loss produced by the Holocaust was trust in the world.
- III. The Holocaust causes remorseful reflection that may build hope for the future. There is an identifiable cycle of optimism, disillusionment and despair, and then finally determination.

Lecture Eight: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?

- I. The American Dream remains alive, but how much and how well depends on where we have been.
- II. Sound American dreaming must now take place in a global village. Living in isolation is no longer a possibility, and therefore makes it imperative to consider the following suppositions:
 - A. The American Dream will continue to emphasize new beginnings, but this will not rest on optimism about American life.
 - 1. People feel more realism bordering on disillusionment.
 - 2. New beginnings are much more difficult than the dream implies.
 - B. The American Dream rests on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but it can't be assumed that democracy can meet every expectation placed upon it.
 - C. The American Dream will still place a premium on the individual's pursuit of happiness, but it can't be assumed the communal good will be thereby be enhanced.
 - D. The American Dream will continue to insist that there are open frontiers and vast opportunities to be seized, but no longer can the future be regarded as unlimited.
 - 1. Success led to complacency about the cost factors that transactions carry with them.
 - 2. Nothing is free, scarcity is real, and economic instability erodes wealth.
 - E. The American Dream will still stress both material success and the possibility of moral progress, but no longer can it assume the two easily nurture each other.

- F. The American Dream will continue to proclaim that all people be regarded as fundamentally equal, but no longer will Americans be ignorant of the irony and complexity introduced into their lives by that claim.
- G. The American Dream will still assert that human rights must be real, but can no longer assume that the dream, including the value it places on freedom of choice and human rights, is guaranteed a future, yet alone fulfillment in the world.

SUGGESTED READING TO ACCOMPANY

The American Dream: From Its Past to Its Future

Anthology

Fossum, Robert H. and John K. Roth, eds., American Ground: Vistas. Visions and Revisions. New York: Paragon House, 1988. This collection contains selections from many of the texts and authors referred in the lecture series.

Fiction

Albee, Edward. The American Dream.

Cather, Willa. A Lost Lady and My Antonia.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Selected Tales and Sketches.

Lewis, Sinclair. Babbit.

Miller, Arthur. Death of a Salesman.

Gates, Joyce Carol. Them.

Pynchon, Thomas. The Crying of Lot 49.

Steinbeck, John. The Grapes of Wrath.

Styron, William. The Confessions of Nat Turner and Sophie's Choice.

Updike, John. Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich, and Rabbit at Rest.

West, Nathaniel. Day of the Locust.

Poetry

Dickenson, Emily. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson. Frost,

Robert. The Poetry of Robert Frost.

Hughes, Langston. Montage of a Dream Deferred.

MacLeish, Archibald. Land of the Free.

Rich, Adrienne. Poems, Selected and New.

Whitman, Walt. Leaves of Grass.

Non-fiction

Adams, James Truslow. The Epic of America.

Bellah, Robert, et al. Habits of the Heart.

Crevecoeur, J. Hector St. John de. Letters from an American Farmer.

Guimond, James. American Photography and the American Dream.

Hearn, Charles. The American Dream in the Great Depression.

Kerber, Linda K. and Jane Sherron DeHart. Women's America.

Long, Elizabeth. The American Dream and the Popular Novel.

Madden, David, ed. American Dreams: American Nightmares.

Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. The Federalist.

Rosenberg, Emily. Spreading the American Dream.

Roth, John K. American Dreams.

Ryan, Mary P. Womanhood in America.

Shklar, Judith N. American Citizenship.

Terkel, Studs. American Dreams: Lost and Found and The Great Divide.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. Democracy in America.

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden.

Wise, Gene. American Historical Explanations.